



# THE SCHOOL LEADER TOOL

Building Your School-wide Approach to Family Engagement

# REAL FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

At the Flamboyan Foundation, we have seen – and research shows<sup>1</sup> – that families play **Five Essential Roles** in their children’s education: (1) communicate high expectations, (2) monitor performance, (3) support learning at home, (4) guide their path, and (5) advocate for their needs. All families deserve to have access to the information and connections they need to play these roles well; Flamboyan champions REAL Family Engagement within schools and school systems to make that a reality.

**REAL Family Engagement** happens when families have:

- R**elationships with teachers built on trust, ongoing communications, and shared power;
- E**xperiences where educators challenge their own biases and promote racial equity;
- A**cademic partnerships that include grades and social-emotional development; and
- L**eadership in schools, school systems, and communities who create the conditions for meaningful engagement

When family engagement gets **REAL**, educators and families become true allies in educational excellence, schools foster a sense of belonging for everyone, and students succeed in school and beyond. Though it is essential to student success, family engagement is not always an easy or clear task. The **School Leader Tool** is a place for school leaders, and those who support school leaders, to start building a school-wide culture of family engagement.

Evidence shows that students do better in school and life when their families are engaged in their education,<sup>2</sup> and that schools improve faster when families are engaged.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the largest predictor of whether families are involved at home and school are the specific school and teacher practices that encourage and guide families’ engagement.<sup>4</sup> Educators are the experts on curriculum and pedagogy, and families are the experts on their children, from the earliest years to and through adulthood.

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# GETTING **STARTED**

As a school leader, you are constantly collecting, analyzing, and utilizing data. Regular reflection on family engagement data supports deep and equitable family engagement, where all families are engaged in their child’s education, have trusting relationships with their child’s teachers and have the information they need to support their child’s success. Reflection on family engagement data allows us to see our impact, understand gaps, and identify solutions. This type of reflection requires vulnerability, humility, and self-awareness takes time to cultivate. To put it simply, REAL Family Engagement takes work – intrapersonal and interpersonal – and the **School Leader Tool** is here to help.

REAL Family Engagement is not just the strategies or practices teachers use to partner with families; it is a way of being. The **School Leader Tool**:

- Supports school leaders to create the conditions for REAL Family Engagement to thrive;
- Illustrates how high-quality, equitable school-level family engagement can look; and
- Guides those who are coaching school leaders – such as district or CMO family engagement personnel – on what to prioritize and how to support REAL Family Engagement in schools.

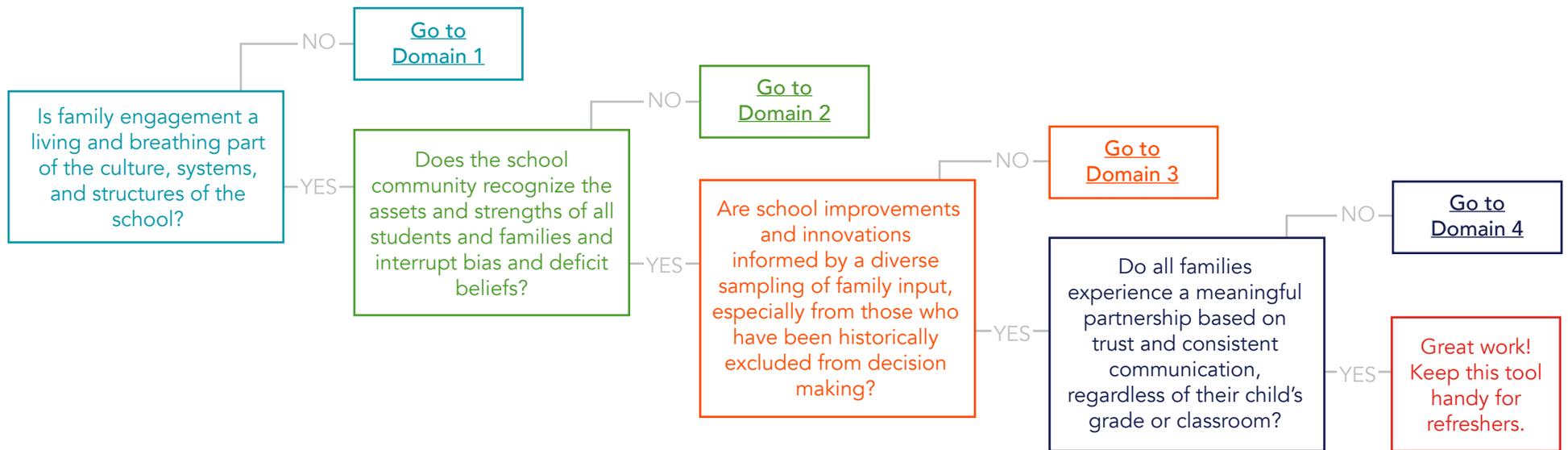
The **School Leader Tool** is organized into four domains:

1. [Embedded Family Engagement](#)
2. [Fostering Asset-Based Beliefs about Families](#)
3. [Listening to Families](#)
4. [High-Quality + Equitable Practices](#)

Within each Domain are a set of prompts to guide reflection and coaching, and sample leader actions.

# GETTING STARTED

We recommend both consuming the **School Leader Tool** in full and in order as well as taking each Domain on its own when needed. The first time you use the Tool, read it in order, starting with Domain 1, to get a sense of the synergies and the uniqueness of each Domain. When deciding what to prioritize or where to begin, this decision tree can help!



# DOMAIN 1: EMBEDDED FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

*Family engagement is a living and breathing part of the culture, systems, and structures of the school.*

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## THE WHY

REAL Family Engagement must be explicitly connected to other buckets of work and directly tied to school, leader, and educator goals. It cannot and should not be a single person's job. When family engagement becomes a routine and predictable part of staff and grade-level meetings, data reflections, staff professional development, and the guiding documents of the school, REAL Family Engagement is more attainable and sustainable. As it becomes a part of the culture of the school, staff, families, and students recognize it as a priority. Time is limited, so fully embedding family engagement into existing systems and structures is core to its success and sustainability. Family engagement cannot live in a silo, and it will not be prioritized if systems do not support prioritization.

## REFLECTION PROMPTS + SAMPLE LEADER ACTIONS

### How is family engagement connected to school-wide goals?

- Explicitly identify a teacher-family partnership approach by including family engagement strategies in school-wide goal setting (i.e., families will be equipped by their teacher with bi-weekly updates on their child's reading level and with strategies to support reading at home so that all students are reading on grade level by the end of grade 3).
- Set explicit and differentiated family engagement goals for all staff (consider different goals for teachers, front office staff, security staff, etc.).
- Connect family engagement goals and strategies to academic and socio-emotional outcomes for students in foundational school documents such as comprehensive school plans.

### Can every staff member clearly describe their role in supporting effective family engagement?

- Onboard new staff to your school-wide family engagement approach.
- Include prompts that discern the mindset, skill, and will of all candidates to effectively engage families in job descriptions and hiring questions.

# DOMAIN 1: EMBEDDED FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

*Family engagement is a living and breathing part of the culture, systems, and structures of the school.*

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## How is family engagement connected to school-wide systems and structures and reflected in your long-term plans?

- Name families as a critical partner in student success in documents such as the student handbook, website, and other external-facing communication.
- Describe your approach to meaningful partnership and communication with families in guiding documents such as annual plans, school performance plans, hiring, master calendar, parent/staff updates, handbooks, etc.
- Ensure that the family-facing school calendar reflects all key family engagement dates (relationship-building opportunities, academic partnering, school events, etc.), including the dates of opportunities for families to provide input and inform school decision making.
- Update calendar regularly.

## How are you creating time and space for staff to reflect on beliefs about families, their relationships with families, and the quality of families' experience at your school?

- Bring new family engagement research, resources, and strategies to staff.
- Allocate time in staff meetings to reflect on bias and beliefs, plan, or build skills around family engagement.
- Build reflection time and protocols into your school's regular routines, such as the school calendar, grade-level team meetings, and staff meetings.
- Include family engagement teacher dialogue and reflection in routine structures, such as team meetings, board meetings, staff meetings, data reflections, informal conversations, and professional development.

## DOMAIN 1: EMBEDDED FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

*Family engagement is a living and breathing part of the culture, systems, and structures of the school.*

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### **In what ways does data inform school-wide messages and priorities?**

- Conduct staff surveys asking whether staff agree that family engagement is a school priority.
- Ensure that staff know how to access data that supports reflection about the equity, quality, and impact of family engagement to develop action steps.
- Data collected from families through surveys and focus groups are used to inform school-wide decisions.

### **How would family engagement work be carried forward in the absence of key individuals?**

- Include the history, vision for, and expectations around family engagement in the school building in onboarding and off-boarding protocols for school leaders.
- Delegate leadership of family engagement to multiple staff/roles across the school building, such as assistant principals, instructional coaches, deans, social workers, teachers, office staff, etc.
- Build family engagement into future planning documents such as the budget, the calendar, and the professional development scope and sequence.

## DOMAIN 2: FOSTERING ASSET-BASED BELIEFS ABOUT FAMILIES

*The school community recognizes the assets and strengths of all students and families and interrupts bias and deficit beliefs.*

### THE WHY

REAL Family Engagement is possible when educators challenge their own implicit biases and reflect on how these attitudes or stereotypes unconsciously affect our understanding, actions, and decisions. Research links educators' implicit biases to the well-documented and persistent achievement gaps for Black and Latinx students.<sup>5</sup> Decades of research show that teachers, leaders, and administrators frequently treat students of color and their families in ways that negatively impact their school experience and learning. These actions are often the result of implicit bias and deficit beliefs about students based on race, socio-economic, or immigration status. The good news is that our implicit biases are malleable. With effort, reflection, and a commitment to challenging ourselves and others, we can disrupt our implicit biases and take an asset-based approach to partnering with students and families.

### REFLECTION PROMPTS + SAMPLE LEADER ACTIONS

**How do you routinely discuss and embrace the strengths of your students, families, and school community?**

- Model an asset-based stance when talking about and interacting with students and families.
- Provide staff opportunities to share stories highlighting the multitude of ways families engage in their child's education.
- Encourage staffs' use of asset-based language when discussing students and families.

**How are you proactively building the capacity of staff to interrupt bias and deficit-based beliefs about families, both within themselves and amongst colleagues?**

- Allocate time in routine meetings, such as staff meetings or grade-level team meetings, to reflect on beliefs about families and students.
- Equip staff to feel confident challenging colleague's biases towards students and families.
- Provide staff with opportunities to learn about [cultural competency](#), [cultural humility](#), and how to challenge deficit beliefs about families and students.

## DOMAIN 2: FOSTERING ASSET-BASED BELIEFS ABOUT FAMILIES

*The school community recognizes the assets and strengths of all students and families and interrupts bias and deficit beliefs.*

### How do you – as the school leader – challenge dispositions toward blaming families and proactively build the capacity of staff to interrupt bias and deficit beliefs about families?

- Prioritize time and space to have reflective conversations about identity, bias, and beliefs about students and families.
- Establish a *common language* to engage in conversations about the way in which identity and personal experience shape individual biases.
- Facilitate conversations about implicit bias and its potential impact on students and families.
- Follow-up with individuals after conversations in which they modeled vulnerability or engaged in an honest conversation. Recognize that these conversations are hard and offer continued support.
- Pay attention to staffs' expressed beliefs about students and families, and use observational data to drive reflective conversations with staff, both individually and in groups.
- Use Flamboyan's [Challenging Assumptions Reflection Tool](#).
- Gather data on beliefs about families and routinely use this data to drive reflective conversations.
- Use family voice to challenge deficit beliefs, such as asking families to share their experiences and perspective at a staff meeting.

### How do staff interactions with families reflect their asset-based beliefs?

- Ensure staff engages *all* families in their children's education in respectful and affirming ways [[see Domain 4](#)].
- Include questions gauging staff beliefs about families on staff surveys, such as:
  - ✓ My school helps teachers be conscious of their biases towards families.
  - ✓ My students' families are invested in supporting their children's learning.
  - ✓ My students' families want me to reach out to them.
  - ✓ The time I spend engaging families is worth it.
- Celebrate positive staff-family interactions and name them when you see them.
- Describe the positive interactions and name the impact that interaction might have had on the family and child.

## DOMAIN 3: LISTENING TO FAMILIES

*School improvements and innovations are informed by a diverse sampling of family input, especially from those who have been historically excluded from decision making.*

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### THE WHY

REAL Family Engagement encourages family voice as an equalizer. As stated previously, while educators are the experts on curriculum and pedagogy, families are the experts on their children. When working in partnership, schools can make more inclusive and equitable decisions in support of educational outcomes for all children. Equitable family voice thrives when schools create platforms for all families to share their honest experiences and perceptions. When school leaders and staff are intentional about listening to families, schools can respond, adapt, and evolve in response to what the community needs. Listening to families sets the condition for equal partnership between those who make decisions and those impacted by decisions, effectively maximizing shared power. Deeply listening to families works in service of every family possessing a strong sense of belonging, purpose, and value in a school community.

### REFLECTION PROMPTS + SAMPLE LEADER ACTIONS

**How do you use family voice to inform school improvements and innovations?**

- Be present to greet and meet with families during arrival and dismissal.
- Collect input on families' aspirations for the school, such as their wants and needs for afterschool programming.
- Ensure school-wide policies (discipline, attendance, health, grading, etc.) reflect family input with specific attention to racial equity.
- Seek family input so that afterschool programming is responsive to families' wants and needs.

## DOMAIN 3: LISTENING TO FAMILIES

*School improvements and innovations are informed by a diverse sampling of family input, especially from those who have been historically excluded from decision making.*

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### How do you develop staff to be [empathic listeners](#)?

- Equip teachers to see themselves as the primary relationship-holder and communicator with families, and they listen to and share family stories.
- Create systems that allow teachers to share up key insights, needs, and experiences they hear from families.
- Ensure teachers know about resources available for families so they can share these as needed.
- Provide explicit training and practice on formal and informal listening strategies.

### Whose input gets heard and receives the most traction? Why?

- Create an explicit goal to hear from a representative sample of families with no discrepancies based on race, class, home-language, gender, immigration status, sexual orientation, education, or employment status, etc.
- Develop teachers to identify families whose voices might not be heard and act to elevate and respond to these voices.
- Create platforms for teachers to share with school leadership what they're hearing in informal conversations with families.
- Inventory communication trends to identify families whose voices are least frequently heard and/or reflected in school decision making.

### How are you differentiating your outreach to families to ensure that families who have historically been excluded from decision making are heard?

- Approach family listening in a variety of methods – including surveys, focus groups, and empathy interviews – to ensure ALL families are heard.
- Create a calendar that shows the family listening opportunities you are providing to ensure you are consistently utilizing multiple and varied platforms for families to provide input and inform school decisions.

## DOMAIN 3: LISTENING TO FAMILIES

*School improvements and innovations are informed by a diverse sampling of family input, especially from those who have been historically excluded from decision making.*

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### **How are you strategically using input and feedback from families to make decisions in service of equity and impact?**

- Actively seek a diverse set of qualitative feedback on the experience and impact of family engagement work to identify what works well and where there is room for improvement.
- Include time to share and reflect on family feedback and input in staff meetings.
- As teachers share feedback, needs, and wants from families, identify trends and patterns to inform current or future decisions.

### **How are you communicating back to families how their input and feedback are utilized?**

- Share what you have heard from families and what action the school is taking in response in a PTA/PTO meetings.
- Draft end of year memos to share with families how their input will be used to drive improvement and change for the following year. Thank families for sharing openly and honestly.
- Be transparent about your decisions when sharing them back with families. Show families how their feedback was or was not incorporated and why. Make sure this feedback cycle is timely and responsive.

## DOMAIN 4: HIGH-QUALITY + EQUITABLE PRACTICES

*All families experience a meaningful partnership based on trust and consistent communication, regardless of their child's grade or classroom.*

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### THE WHY

REAL Family Engagement happens when families play key roles to accelerate student learning and are equipped to play these roles through quality family engagement experiences. To ensure that all families have access to these kinds of experiences at school, leaders should work to ensure there is a school-wide approach to relationship building, academic partnering, and communicating with all families. Leaders are responsible for investing all members of the school community in a collective commitment to quality practice. Just as leaders support teacher development in curricular knowledge or instructional practice, family engagement is an educator skill that schools can develop through targeted and differentiated professional development opportunities.

### REFLECTION PROMPTS + SAMPLE LEADER ACTIONS

**How do your family engagement practices give families what they need to communicate high expectations, monitor and support learning, and guide and advocate for their child?**

- Develop the school's approach to family engagement to give families information, resources, and school-based partners.
- Identify specific strategies teachers will use to build trusting relationships with families at the start of the school year, like home visits and welcome calls. Explicitly connect the importance of relationship-building to other family engagement strategies.
- When sharing resources and information, make sure they are accessible both in language and word choice (i.e., stay away from education jargon).
- Ensure families experience meaningful engagement outside of school-based events.
- Use exit tickets or surveys after conferences or events to assess families' experiences and measure impact and success.

## DOMAIN 4: HIGH-QUALITY + EQUITABLE PRACTICES

*All families experience a meaningful partnership based on trust and consistent communication, regardless of their child's grade or classroom.*

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### How do staff use qualitative and quantitative data to reflect on the quality, equity, and impact of their family engagement practices?

- Establish systems for teachers to collect and reflect on family engagement data alongside other data streams and demographic data.
- Model vulnerability and reflection in your own approach to analyzing data.
- Ensure all data – especially qualitative data – include a diverse set of voices and perspectives.

### How do you invest and build staff capacity for quality family engagement practices?

- Ensure all school staff can clearly articulate what quality family engagement looks and sounds like, specifically relationship building, academic partnering, and ongoing communication.
- Provide staff with clear expectations on what quality looks and sounds like as it relates to your key family engagement practices, like home visits, conferences, or ongoing communication.
- Observe and provide feedback on family engagement practices, like parent-teacher conferences or family communication.
- Design professional development for educators based on trends in observed strengths and areas for growth and actively seek out resources as needed.

### How does your approach to family engagement reflect families' preferences and feedback?

- Collect family feedback to assess the quality and impact of family engagement practices.
- Share what families say in feedback with your staff and supervisors.
- Allow teachers to differentiate their approach to meet the needs of all families.

# AT-A-GLANCE

## Domain 1: Embedded Family Engagement

*Family engagement is a living and breathing part of the culture, systems, and structures of the school.*

- How is family engagement connected to school-wide goals?
- Can every staff member clearly describe their role in supporting effective family engagement?
- How is family engagement connected to school-wide systems and structures, and reflected in your long-term plans?
- How are you creating time and space for staff to reflect on beliefs about families, their relationships with families, and the quality of families' experience at your school?
- In what ways does data inform school-wide messages and priorities?
- How would family engagement work be carried forward in the absence of key individuals?

## Domain 3: Listening To Families

*School improvements and innovations are informed by a diverse sampling of family input, especially from those who have been historically excluded from decision making.*

- What questions do you ask families to inform school improvements and innovations?
- How do you develop staff to be empathic listeners?
- Whose input gets heard and receives the most traction? Why?
- How are you differentiating your outreach to families to ensure that families who have historically been excluded from decision making are heard?
- How are you strategically using input and feedback from families to make decisions in service of equity and impact?
- How are you communicating back to families how their input and feedback are utilized?

## Domain 2: Fostering Asset-Based Beliefs About Families

*The school community recognizes the assets and strengths of all students and families and interrupts bias and deficit beliefs.*

- How do you routinely discuss and embrace the strengths of your students, families, and school community?
- How are you creating or strengthening a brave space and psychological safety for all staff to engage in conversations about beliefs and biases?
- How do you – as the school leader – challenge low expectations, deficit beliefs, and dispositions toward blaming families?
- How are you proactively building the capacity of staff to interrupt bias and deficit-based beliefs about families, both within themselves and amongst colleagues?
- How do staff interactions with families reflect their asset-based beliefs?

## Domain 4: High-Quality + Equitable Practices

*All families experience a meaningful partnership based on trust and consistent communication, regardless of their child's grade or classroom.*

- How do your family engagement practices give families what they need to communicate high expectations, monitor and support learning, and guide and advocate for their child?
- How do you invest and build staff capacity for quality family engagement practices?
- How do staff use qualitative and quantitative data to reflect on the quality and impact of their family engagement practices?
- How will your approach to family engagement evolve based on your school's current needs and assets?
- How does your approach to family engagement reflect families' preferences and feedback?

# SCHOOL LEADER **WORKBOOK**

Write your school's vision statement. Underline where family engagement shows up.

Review your foundational documents. Where is family engagement missing?

Who leads (or is a leader of) family engagement at your school?

List the strategies your school will employ to **build relationships with families**. Consider both the beginning of the year and throughout the school year.

## SCHOOL LEADER **WORKBOOK**

List the modes and frequency your school will use to **communicate with families**. Communication should include both mass communication, such as school or classroom newsletters, and individualized communication.

List the ways your school will **academically partner with families**. Include one-on-one and group opportunities.

How are you ensuring **equity** across all practices?

# CITATIONS

1. [Flamboyan's 5 Essential Roles](#)
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3. Bryk, A. Sebring, P., Allensworth, A., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J. (2010). *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
4. Dauber, S. L., & Epstein, J. L. (1989). Parents' attitudes and practices of involvement in inner-city elementary and middle schools. In N. Chavkin (Ed.), *Families and schools in a pluralistic society* (pp. 53-71). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
5. [http://www.pthvp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/PTHV\\_Study1\\_Report.pdf](http://www.pthvp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/PTHV_Study1_Report.pdf)

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*This tool has been developed based on an extensive research review, through conversations with national and local experts, and from lessons learned from DC schools and principals who effectively engage families. Many thanks go to the incredible families, educators, and leaders who have shared their wisdom, experience, and feedback with us.*

**[What did you think of The School Leader Tool?](#)**  
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